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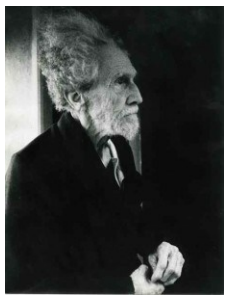
What Did Ezra Pound Really Say?

Michael Collins Piper

2,465 words



From 1945 through 1958 America's iconoclastic poet — the flamboyant Ezra Pound, one of the most influential individuals of his generation — was held in a Washington, D.C. mental institution, accused of treason. Pound had merely done what he had always done — spoken his mind. Unfortunately for Pound, however, he had made the error of criticizing the American government in a series of broadcasts from Italy during World War II. For that he was made to pay the price. Was Pound a traitor — or a prophet? Read his words and judge for yourself.

American students have been taught by scandalized educators that famed American poet and philosopher Ezra Pound delivered "treasonous" English-language radio broadcasts from Italy (directed to both Americans and to the British) during World War II. However, as noted by Robert H. Walker, an editor for the Greenwood Press: "Thousands of people have heard about them, scores have been affected by them, yet but a handful has ever heard or read them." This ignorance of Pound's most controversial political rhetoric is ironic, inasmuch as:

> No other American — and only a few individuals throughout the world — has left such a strong mark on so many aspects of the 20th century: from poetry to economics, from theater to philosophy, from politics to pedagogy, from Provençal to Chinese. If Pound was not always totally accepted, at least he was unavoidably there.

One critic called Pound's broadcasts a "confused mixture of fascist apologetics, economic theory, anti-Semitism, literary judgment and memory" Another described them as "an unholy mixture of ambiguity, obscurity, inappropriate subject matters [and] vituperation," adding (grudgingly) there were "a few pearls of unexpected wisdom."

Despite all the furor over Pound's broadcasts — which were heard between January of 1941 through July of 1943 — it was not until 1978 that a full-length 465-page compendium of transcriptions of the broadcasts was assembled by Prof. Leonard Doob of Yale University in association with aforementioned Greenwood Press. Published under the title *Ezra Pound Speaking: Radio Speeches of World War II*, the volume provides the reader a comprehensive look at Pound's philosophy as it was presented by the poet himself in what Robert Walker, who wrote the foreword to the compendium, describes as "that flair for dramatic hyperbole."

What follows is an attempt to synthesize Pound's extensive verbal parries. Most of what appears here has never been printed anywhere except in the compendium of Pound's wartime broadcasts. Thus, for the first time ever — for a popular audience — here is what Pound really had to say, not what his critics claim he said. When he was broadcasting from Italy during wartime, Pound evidently pondered the possibility of one day compiling transcriptions of his broadcasts (or at least expected — quite correctly — that one day the transcripts would be compiled by someone else). He hoped the broadcasts would show a consistent thread once they were committed to print. Pound recognized relaying such a massive amount of information about so many seemingly unrelated subjects might be confusing listeners less widely read than he. However, the poet also had very firm ideas about the need of his listeners to be able to synthesize the broad range of material that appeared in his colorful lectures.

Pound was sure his remarks on radio were not seditious, but were strictly informational and dedicated to traditional principles of Americanism — including the Constitution, in particular. In response to media claims that he was a fascist propagandist, Pound had this to say:

> If anyone takes the trouble to record and examine the series of talks I have made over this radio it will be found I have used three sorts of material: historical facts; convictions of experienced men, based on fact; and the fruits of my own experience. The facts . . . mostly antedate the fascist era and cannot be considered as improvisations trumped up to meet present requirements. Neither can the beliefs of Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Jackson, Van Buren, and Lincoln be laughed off as mere fascist propaganda. And even my own observations date largely before the opening of the present hostilities. I defend the particularly American, North American, United States heritage. If anybody can find anything hostile to the Constitution of the U.S.A. in these speeches, it would greatly interest me to know what. It may be bizarre, eccentric, quaint, old-fashioned of me to refer to that document, but I wish more Americans would at least read it. It is not light and easy reading but it contains several points of interest, whereby some of our present officials could, if they but would, profit greatly.

Pound's immediate concern was the war in Europe — "this war on youth — on a generation" –which he described as the natural result of the "age of the chief war pimps." He hated the very idea that Americans were being primed for war, and on the very day of Pearl Harbor he denounced the idea that American boys should soon be marching off to war: "I do not want my compatriots from the ages of 20 to 40 to go get slaughtered to keep up the Sassoon and other British Jew rackets in Singapore and in Shanghai. That is not my idea of American patriotism," he added.

In Pound's view, the American government alliance with British finance capitalism and Soviet Bolshevism was contrary to America's tradition and heritage: "Why did you take up with those gangs?" he rhetorically asked his listeners.

> Two gangs. [The] Jews' gang in London, and [the] Jew murderous gang over in

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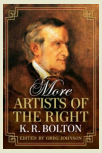

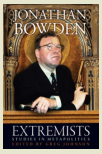

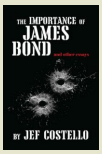

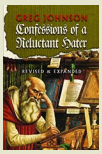

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Moscow? Do you like Mr. Litvinov? [Soviet ambassador to Britain Meyer Wallach, alias Litvinov, born 1876. — Ed.] Do the people from Delaware and Virginia and Connecticut and Massachusetts . . . who live in painted, neat, white houses . . . do these folks really approve [of] Mr. Litvinov and his gang, and all he stands for?

There was no reason for U.S. intervention abroad, he said:

> The place to defend the American heritage is on the American continent. And no man who had any part in helping [Franklin] Delano Roosevelt get the United States into [the war] has enough sense to win anything . . . The men who wintered at Valley Forge did not suffer those months of intense cold and hunger in the hope that . . . the union of the colonies would one day be able to stir up wars between other countries in order to sell them munitions.

What was the American tradition? According to Pound:

> The determination of our forbears to set up and maintain in the North American continent a government better than any other. The determination to govern ourselves internally, better than any other nation on earth. The idea of Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, to keep out of foreign shindies.

Of FDR's interventionism, he declared: "To send boys from Omaha to Singapore to die for British monopoly and brutality is not the act of an American patriot." However, Pound said: "Don't shoot the President. I dare say he deserves worse, but . . . [a]ssassination only makes more mess." Pound saw the American national tradition being buried by the aggressive new internationalism.

According to Pound's harsh judgment:

> The American gangster did not spend his time shooting women and children. He may have been misguided, but in general he spent his time fighting superior forces at considerable risk to himself . . . not in dropping booby traps for unwary infants. I therefore object to the *modus* in which the American troops obey their high commander. This *modus* is not in the spirit of Washington or of Stephen Decatur."

Pound hated war and detected a particular undercurrent in the previous wars of history. Wars, he said, were destructive to nation-states, but profitable for the special interests. Pound said international bankers–Jewish bankers, in particular–were those who were the primary beneficiaries of the profits of from war. He pulled no punches when he declared:

> Sometime the Anglo-Saxon may awaken to the fact that . . . nations are shoved into wars in order to destroy themselves, to break up their structure, to destroy their social order, to destroy their populations. And no more flaming and flagrant case appears in history than our own American Civil War, said to be an occidental record for size of armies employed and only surpassed by the more recent triumphs of [the Warburg banking family:] the wars of 1914 and the present one.

Although World War II itself was much on Pound's mind, the poet's primary concern, referenced repeatedly throughout his broadcasts, was the issue of usury and the control of money and economy by private special interests. "There is no freedom without economic freedom," he said. "Freedom that does not include freedom from debt is plain bunkum. It is fetid and foul logomachy to call such servitude freedom . . .Yes, freedom from all sorts of debt, including debt at usurious interest." Usury, he said, was a cause of war throughout history.

In Pound's view understanding the issue of usury was central to understanding history:

> Until you know who has lent what to whom, you know nothing whatever of politics, you know nothing whatever of history, you know nothing of international wrangles. The usury system does no nation . . . any good whatsoever. It is an internal peril to him who hath, and it can make no use of nations in the play of international diplomacy save to breed strife between them and use the worst as flails against the best. It is the usurer's game to hurl the savage against the civilized opponent. The game is not pretty, it is not a very safe game. It does no one any credit.

Pound thus traced the history of the current war: "This war did not begin in 1939. It is not a unique result of the infamous Versailles Treaty. It is impossible to understand it without knowing at least a few precedent historic events, which mark the cycle of combat. No man can understand it without knowing at least a few facts and their chronological sequence. This war is part of the age-old struggle between the usurer and the rest of mankind: between the usurer and peasant, the usurer and producer, and finally between the usurer and the merchant, between usurocracy and the mercantilist system . . . "The present war dates at least from the founding of the Bank of England at the end of the 17th century, 1694-8. Half a century later, the London usurocracy shut down on the issue of paper money by the Pennsylvania colony, A.D. 1750. This is not usually given prominence in the U.S. school histories. The 13 colonies rebelled, quite successfully, 26 years later, A.D. 1776." According to Pound, it was the money issue (above all) that united the Allies during the second 20th-century war against Germany: "Gold. Nothing else uniting the three governments, England, Russia, United States of America. That is the interest–gold, usury, debt, monopoly, class interest, and possibly gross indifference and contempt for humanity."

Although "gold" was central to the world's struggle, Pound still felt gold "is a coward. Gold is not the backbone of nations. It is their ruin. A coward, at the first breath of danger gold flows away, gold flows out of the country." Pound perceived Germany under Hitler as a nation that stood against the international money lenders and communist Russia under Stalin as a system that stood against humanity itself.

He told his listeners:

> Now if you know anything whatsoever of modern Europe and Asia, you know Hitler stands for putting men over machines. If you don't know that, you know nothing. And beyond that you either know or do not know that Stalin's regime considers humanity as nothing save raw material. Deliver so many carloads of human material at the consumption point. That is the logical result of materialism. If you assert that men are dirty, that humanity is merely material, that is where you come out. And the old Georgian train robber [Josef Stalin — ed.] is perfectly logical. If all things are merely material, man is material–and the system of anti-man treats man as matter.

The real enemy, said Pound, was international capitalism. All people everywhere were victims: "They're working day and night, picking your pockets," he said. "Every day and all day and all night picking your pockets and picking the Russian working man's pockets." Capital, however, he said, was "not international, it is not hyper-national. It is sub-national. A quicksand under the nations, destroying all nations, destroying all law and government, destroying the nations, one at a time, Russian empire and Austria, 20 years past, France yesterday, England today."

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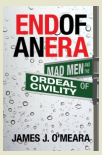

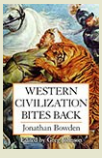

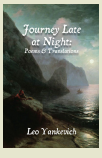

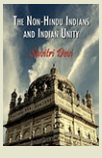

According to Pound, Americans had no idea why they were being expected to fight in Britain's war with Germany: "Even Mr. Churchill hasn't had the grass to tell the American people why he wants them to die, to save what. He is fighting for the gold standard and monopoly. Namely the power to starve the whole of mankind, and make it pay through the nose before it can eat the fruit of its own labor." As far as the English were concerned, in Pound's broadcasts aimed at the British Isles he warned his listeners that although Russian-style communist totalitarianism was a threat to British freedom, it was not the biggest threat Britain faced: You are threatened. You are threatened by the Russian methods of administration. Those methods [are not] your sole danger. It is, in fact, so far from being your sole danger that I have, in over two years of talk over this radio, possibly never referred to it before.

Usury has gnawed into England since the days of Elizabeth. First it was mortgages, mortgages on earls' estates; usury against the feudal nobility. Then there were attacks on the common land, filchings of village common pasture. Then there developed a usury system, an international usury system, from Cromwell's time, ever increasing." In the end, Pound suggested, it would be the big money interests who would really win the war — not any particular nation-state — and the foundation for future wars would be set in place: "The nomadic parasites will shift out of London and into Manhattan. And this will be presented under a camouflage of national slogans. It will be represented as an American victory. It will not be an American victory. The moment is serious. The moment is also confusing. It is confusing because there are two sets of concurrent phenomena, namely, those connected with fighting this war, and those which sow seeds for the next one."

Pound believed one of the major problems of the day — which itself had contributed to war fever–was the manipulation of the press, particularly in the United States: "I naturally mistrust newspaper news from America," he declared. "I grope in the mass of lies, knowing most of the sources are wholly untrustworthy." According to Pound: "The United States has been misinformed. The United States has been led down the garden path, and may be down under the daisies. All through shutting out news.

The Barnes Review, vol. 3, no. 12 (December 1997).

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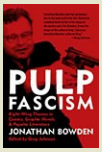

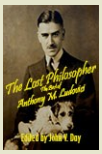

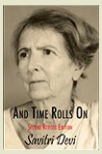

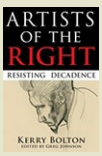

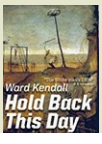

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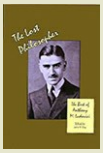

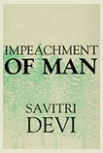

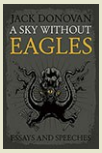

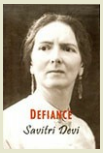

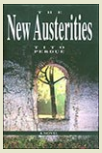

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